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Case against the MX, a shell game that could misfire

MX: Prescription for Disaster, by Dr. Herbert Scoville Jr. Cambridge: The MIT Press. \$6.95 (paperback).

By Burke Wilkinson

In the jaunty jargon of Armageddon, the delivery vehicle for the hotly debated MX missile is called "the bus," and the independently targetable missiles themselves are the "passengers." In the same ghoulish lexicon, the cluster of 23 shelters that would conceal one live and mobile missile is the "race course."

On the drawing board, the race course is being supplanted by a series of clusters (hardened silos) in line ahead, connected by straight roads. But the nightmarish shell game remains the same. The Soviets must guess which silo contains the live missile. In order to be absolutely sure that they knock it out, they would have to saturate all 23 clusters in the area.

The size and cost of the project — approved in principle during the Carter administration — are staggering. The number of

seems, as Dr. Scoville explains it, to be to act as a counterforce to the Soviet intercontinental missiles, and the area itself to be a kind of vast "sponge" to absorb the main thrust of a first strike.

The trouble here is that in Russian eyes the MX may well appear to be a direct threat to those huge ICBMs that form 75 percent of the strategic capability of the USSR. (By contrast, US capability is a triad of missile, bomber, and submarine. The shakiest leg is the missiles. For the foreseeable future the air and sea legs cannot be knocked out in a first strike and are capable of swift retaliation.)

There does exist, Dr. Scoville reminds us, a strategic balance and a kind of stability based on our ability to retaliate. Here is how the MX project would upset this standoff of the two great powers:

- The Soviet hierarchy might mistakenly come to see the MX as the means of a US first strike. This might in turn force them to make a preemptive strike to prevent the US from

Basic points from 'MX: Prescription for Disaster'

1. There is no such thing as a controlled or "sanitized" nuclear war.
2. No one knows how to stop such a war, once started.
3. Therefore the main function of a strategic force is to prevent nuclear war — in a word to *deter*.
4. The US deterrent must have the ability to survive a first strike and still inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor.
5. The United States is *not* weaker than the Soviets. It has strong and retaliatory powers. There is no need to rush into a panic-induced wrong decision.
6. Procuring forces just to "match" Soviet strength is a mindless path. This would, in fact, provide increased incentives for a USSR first strike.
7. The MX missile is such an incentive, "an invitation to nuclear war engraved in US gold."

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proposed cluster areas is 200. They would require 50,000 square miles in Utah and Nevada, a slice of America the size of Alabama. Cost as of today's fast escalating estimate: \$120 billion!

Fortunately for the American people, voices of sanity are being raised against this disastrous proposal. One of the foremost is that of Dr. Herbert Scoville, whose background as an expert on atomic matters includes high posts with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Department, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. His book is short but not exactly a primer, in that some of the material is quite technical. Certain points (see the adjoining box) run like steel sinews through the 18 terse chapters, and they lead to an ineluctable conclusion: the MX missile, deployed as is called for over a vast area where the environmental balance is already delicate, would be an ecological, social, military, political, and economic calamity.

The basic purpose of the 200 MX missiles, with their "dash capability" of quick transport for

destroying their strategic capability.

- In response to the deployment of the MX, the Soviets might build up their own ICBM force so greatly that the US, in turn, would have to expand the MX program beyond the 4,600 silos. A brutal open-ended arms race would be on.

In his next-to-last chapter Dr. Scoville makes a good case for an alternative to the MX. He infinitely prefers a fleet of 200 small submarines, each carrying two 10-warhead missiles. They would operate off US coasts. Hard to find, yet easily controlled from the land, they would cost far less, and they would not impose harsh strains on the environment.

But the thrust of the book, the point driven home by this fair-minded expert with a gift for eloquent indignation, is that the MX is a snare and a delusion and a hazard to human survival.

Burke Wilkinson, a former deputy assistant secretary of state, is a frequent contributor of reviews of books on defense and strategy.